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Geoffrey Arthur Prime

U.S. Aides Say British Spy Gave Soviet Key Data

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 23 — British intelligence officials have determined that a former translator of Russian, charged last summer with espionage, was responsible for one of the longest and potentially most damaging Soviet penetrations of Western intelligence since World War II, according to American officials.

American intelligence officials say that the accused man, Geoffrey Arthur Prime, supplied Moscow with a stream of highly sensitive information about American and British interception of Soviet communications while he was employed as a linguist at Britain's main electronic intelligence center in Cheltenham from 1968 to 1977.

U.S. Seeking Detailed Account

The interception program is the chief source of intelligence information about

the Soviet Union. It is jointly operated by the United States National Security Agency and Britain's Government Communication Headquarters, with participation from Canada and Australia.

Because the installation where Mr. Prime worked serves as a nerve center of the worldwide eavesdropping and code-breaking operation, American intelligence officials believe that the implications of Mr. Prime's efforts are extremely serious.

Concerned at the potential damage, the American officials have pressed the British to provide a detailed account of Mr. Prime's activities. He was arrested in July and is scheduled to stand trial in late November.

Citing stringent secrecy laws, the British Government has so far refused to provide a comprehensive report, stirring alarm and irritation among senior American intelligence officials, who are accustomed to working closely with their British counterparts.

The British Government, however, now in the process of preparing a damage assessment, has briefed American intelligence officials about some aspects of the case. That information was provided by American sources who asked not to be identified.

Mr. Prime's job as a Russian translator at the communications headquarters, these sources said, gave him access to highly classified raw intelligence material flowing into Cheltenham from satellites and ground stations operated by the United States.

Targets of Surveillance Identified

The material included tape recordings and transcripts of intercepted Soviet communications. While Mr. Prime saw only a fraction of the intercepts that are processed at Cheltenham, the American officials said, those he handled or heard about from colleagues clearly identified some of the targets of American and British surveillance.

Mr. Prime kept the Soviet Union informed about new targets, the American sources said.

In addition, much of the material Mr. Prime received was in code and was given to him for translation only after passing through advanced code-cracking computers at Cheltenham.

By telling the Russians which of their communications had been decoded, Mr. Prime compromised the highly sensitive code-breaking effort, the British have found.

Armed with his warnings, Moscow could change radio frequencies, modify codes or take other steps to make communications secure, cutting off access to vitally important information about Soviet military, economic and political developments.

Intelligence Sources Lost

How much of this the Russians actually did as a result of Mr. Prime's work is difficult to determine, according to American officials. They said that during the period when Mr. Prime was employed by British intelligence, several key sources of electronic intelligence about the Soviet Union were lost when Moscow changed communication channels or modified codes.

But a precise damage assessment may never be made, according to intelligence officials, because it is almost impossible to determine what prompted the changes.

"You can never tell for sure what led the Russians to change encryption systems or switch to different channels," one senior intelligence official said. "It's what you don't know in a case like this that scares you most."

In addition, some American officials fear that the information gave the Soviet Union an opportunity to plant misleading information in the Western eavesdropping system, possibly distorting basic intelligence estimates and thus affecting foreign policy decisions.

Recruited in the Early 60's

The American officials said the British had found that Mr. Prime was recruited by the Russians in the early 1960's, when he was stationed in West Berlin by the Royal Air Force.

How he slipped through security checks when hired at the communications headquarters has become a subject of some heat among British intelligence officials, according to the Americans.

The adequacy of security procedures at Cheltenham was questioned in Parliament immediately after Mr. Prime's arrest in July, and the British Government is trying to determine how Mr. Prime escaped detection for so long. His unmasking as a Soviet spy was the result of a sex-offense investigation.

He resigned his job at the communications headquarters in 1977 for reasons that British authorities have not made public, but which were apparently unrelated to security breaches. He then became a wine salesman and later a taxi driver in Cheltenham, 95 miles northwest of London in Gloucestershire.

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Information Provided by Wife

Earlier this year he became the main suspect in an investigation of sexual assaults against young women in the area. When Mr. Prime, who was unemployed at the time, was arrested in July and charged with the offenses, his wife reportedly told the police that she knew nothing about the sex cases but had thought her husband might be a spy.

After several days of additional investigation, Mr. Prime was charged with espionage.

Unlike earlier Soviet "moles" found inside British intelligence services such as Sir Anthony Blount, H. A. R. (Kim) Philby, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess, Mr. Prime did not attend an elite British university or hold a position of prominence in the Government or society.

Instead, he attended a technical college in Staffordshire, England's pottery and porcelain-producing region. He received Russian language training after joining the Royal Air Force.

Mr. Prime, a gaunt-faced man who was something of a loner, was born in the late 1930's in Alton, near Stoke-on-Trent.

The operations of the National Security Agency had been penetrated several times previously by Soviet agents, according to American officials.

Though a final determination must await further briefings by the British, American officials said Mr. Prime's activities appeared to rank among the most serious security breaches in the nearly 30-year history of the National Security Agency.